

The New Great Game and India's Connect Central Asia Policy: Strategic Perspectives and Challenges

Nishtha Kaushiki

The article is a humble attempt to explore the various strategic and political challenges faced by India in its connect central Asia policy (CCAP) in the backdrop of the New Great Game that has overtime developed in the Central Asian Region (CAR). The article analyses the objectives of the major powers in the CAR while establishing linkages between the key developments in the Asian region such as emerging Sino-Russo strategic alliance, Obama's Asia Pivot, Dushanbe summit, etc. It discusses its implications in the form of challenges for India. Finally, it attempts to recommend a multifaceted approach for India to strengthen its position in the CAR.

Keywords: *Connect Central Asia Policy, Geopolitical Shift, New Great Game, Asia Pivot, Sino-Pak Strategic Alliance*

1. INTRODUCTION

9/11 attacks and the subsequent United States (US) war on terror altered the global security scenario. Dominance of security issues and its linkages with economics and politics became its major characteristic. As the significance of the various regions throughout the globe assumed new geopolitical dimensions, Central Asian Region (CAR) received immediate and utmost attention. The geopolitical importance of the Central Asian has been highlighted by the fact that the same has been labelled as Russia's 'strategic backyard', Washington's 'Greater Middle East', the new 'Far West' of China and so forth. The vital resources of uranium, hydrocarbons and oil of the region and its physical proximity to South Asia, made the region indispensable for every country, especially for Europe and South Asia.

The region's unique geopolitical location- between Russia and China (historically antagonistic powers) invited the presence of regional and trans-regional players since its inception after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. As US decided to shift its focus to the Central Asian region (CAR), it devised a strategy of "Greater Central Asia" aiming to marginalise Russia and China. "The 'New Great Game' was developed in Central Asia involving Russia, America, Europe and China as key players as well as Iran, Turkey and Pakistan as regional players. America sees India as a balancing power of the involvement of Russia and China" (Usha, 2012:108).

The role of various international and regional organizations such as the UN, NATO, and SCO coupled with the interests that each individual country has in this region, have given a strategic push to the new great game in central Asia. The presence of western powers in Afghanistan, which serves as a gate between Central and South Asia, has added to the geostrategic and geopolitical significance of the region. The world at present looks towards the possible developments in the region in the eventuality of US exit from Afghanistan in 2014. Each country thus has its own vested interests in the region, and, any major political and military development in this region has the capacity to influence internal security of Russia, China (Xinjiang) and India (Kashmir).

Amidst the geopolitical changes, India too rearticulated its foreign policy towards pragmatism and strengthened its relationship with the US and its partner countries such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea. It also focused on its immediate neighbours such as Pakistan and China. India tried to make its presence felt with the formulation of 'Look North' policy and with the establishment and funding of the Farkhor and Ayni air bases in Tajikistan. However, India's absence from Shanghai Cooperation (SCO) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and major policy initiatives from both regions were the main reasons as to why India couldn't promptly make a place for itself as other countries did. India was diplomatically a latecomer in the CAR and thus is "under-involved" in the region despite the same being accepted as India's "extended neighbourhood" within the circles of foreign policy makers. On a parallel front, other countries such as China, Pakistan and Russia had already deepened their presence in the region. As a result, India has been considerably marginalised in the region's strategic and political spheres which have consequences even in the economic field.

Though the year 2012 marked the twentieth year of India-Central Asia relations in the post Soviet period, India didn't gain any strategic leverage during this time period, and consequently, the fear of losing out in the New Great Game was predominant in the political and diplomatic circles. As emphasized by the Honourable Vice President Mohammad Hamid Ansari, *"It is thus evident that the new ground realities in the post-Soviet period called for a redefining of India's strategic interests in the region. Our primary interest was stability in the region. The task of diplomacy was to build new relationships and protect and enhance economic and commercial interests. We were successful in the first and are still struggling with the second"* (Ansari, 2012).

In the above background, a 'Connect Central Asia' policy (CCAP)¹ was unveiled by the Minister of State for External Affairs, E. Ahmed, in a key note address at the first meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue, a Track two initiative, organized on 12-13 June 2012 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The purpose of this meeting was to revive India's stagnant relations with the five CARs. Thus, the real challenge that emerges for India is to find ways and means to enhance its presence in the two regions much beyond the other major players in the region. This paper is a modest attempt to focus on the strategic and diplomatic objectives of India in the Central Asian region in the light of the activities of major powers in the Central Asian region.

2. STRATEGIC INTERESTS OF US, CHINA AND RUSSIA

At this point and in the above background, it becomes considerably important to indicate the interests of the major powers in the region so as to gain an insight into the importance of CARs from an international perspective.

Central Asia is one region where the U.S. has openly acknowledged its worth to its own

¹ The CCAP is diplomatic policy aimed to strengthen India's presence in the CAR through various approaches such as political, economic, security and cultural relations. The main focus of the policy is to build upon strong linkages in the CAR through regular exchange of high level visits, conclusion of strategic agreements with the countries of the CAR, cooperating at multilateral levels with the SCO, Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), Re-activation of the International North-South Corridor, tapping the vital energy resources etc.

national interest. US took note of the importance of the Central Asian region in 1999 wherein the 'Silk Road Strategy Act' was introduced and passed by the congress, though never passed by the senate. It aimed to amend the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 to target assistance to support the economic and political independence of the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Since then the CARs have been the recipient of US aid with the conditions of promotion of democracy, market reforms, etc., attached to them. Simultaneously, the US also encouraged the interests of the other countries and involved the academicians in the CARs with the debate focussing on the revival of the new silk route, etc.

As the situation in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region remained disturbed since the 1990s, it became apparent that US involvement in the region was inevitable. The WTO attacks of 2001 defined the contours of US policy in the region as Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage stated, "*Stability in the area is of paramount importance and vital national interest*" (Nichol, 2013). US policy towards the Central Asian nations has been aimed at facilitating their cooperation with U.S. and NATO stabilization efforts in Afghanistan and their efforts to combat terrorism; proliferation; and trafficking in arms, drugs, and persons. "Other U.S. objectives include promoting free markets, democratization, human rights, energy development, and the forging of East-West and Central Asia-South Asia trade links" (Nichol, 2013:2).

The U.S. efficiently utilised an opportunity to increase its presence in the region and to partially legalise its war on terror on the international platform by using the territories of the CARs in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). Over-flight permission and other support were gained by the U.S. from the front line CARs. The U.S. has a variety of interests in the region with each Central Asian republic catering to a different need. "U.S. interests in Kazakhstan have included securing and eliminating Soviet-era nuclear and biological weapons materials and facilities. U.S. energy firms have invested in oil and natural gas development in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and successive administrations have backed diverse export routes to the West for these resources. U.S. policy toward Kyrgyzstan has long included support for its civil society. In Tajikistan, the United States focuses on developmental assistance to bolster the fragile economy and address high poverty rates. U.S. relations with Uzbekistan—the most populous state in the heart of the region—were cool after 2005, but recently have improved" (Nichol, 2013:ii).

With the discovery of hydrocarbons and natural gas in the region, the geo-political significance of the region for U.S. and its European allies has only increased by leaps and bounds. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 would only heighten its diplomatic (political and economic) measures in the region to keep its power in the region unchallenged and undiffused.

Apart from the above mentioned objectives, the most underlying aim of the U.S. has been to limit the influence of China and Russia through Shanghai Cooperation's (SCO) Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) and CSTO's Collective Rapid Reaction Force respectively. The aim of the US is to involve the five countries of the region with alternatives for boosting their economies (such as energy cooperation and foreign investment) so that economically the dependence and dominance of Russia and China in the international market remains limited. In this scenario, India is expected to speed up its efforts to make its presence felt in the region.

In addition, diplomatic and strategic interests of U.S. are extended to Pakistan and South Asia as emerging players in world politics like India trying to make its presence felt. Post 9/11, Pakistan has become among the leading recipients of U.S. foreign assistance while

enjoying the status of a major non-NATO ally. “Since 1948, the United States has pledged more than \$30 billion in direct aid, about half for military assistance. Two-thirds of this total aid was appropriated in the post-9/11 era from FY2002 to FY2011” (Epstein and Kronstadt, 2013:i). In the name of military assistance to combat Al-Qaida and the radical Islamic terrorist organisations, “Pakistan has been supplied with Harpoon anti-ship missiles worth \$ 298 million, F-16 armaments including AMRAAM air-to-air missiles worth and JDAM bomb tail kits for gravity bombs worth \$ 629 million etc” (Epstein and Kronstadt, 2013:19-20). These developments only point in the direction the extent to which South Asia is being militarized for future combat operations in Central Asia if the need arises.

February 2013 Afghan Peace talks in London wherein US, UK, Afghanistan and Pakistan participated and discussed on the prospects for peace post 2014 in the region emphasized on the inclusion of Taliban. Since the US war on terror would be finished in Afghanistan by 2014 or let’s say the US would no longer be strategically inclined to continue its presence in the region unless a game change event takes place, it would leave ample scope for other countries to increase their stature. Keeping in view the initiatives taken by the U.S. in the past to maintain its foothold in the region, it becomes imperative for India to keep itself engaged in the region through diplomatic channels so that it is not left out when the consequences of U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan begin to emerge. In fact, stability in Afghanistan post 2014 and onwards is more crucial for India as compared to the other major powers. At the same time, India has to be cautious that its initiatives in the region are taken in a proper perspective rather than strategies adopted by an upcoming ally of the US as an ‘economic linchpin’. India deserves and should get an opportunity to play an independent role in the region.

China is another major player whose economic and strategic stakes are next in line along with the US. History has strongly bonded China and Central Asia together. The present day interests of China in the region has been dominated by two reasons- prevention of terrorist activities in China’s Xinjiang province and its mainland and second, its quest for energy that has been fueled by its rapid industrial growth.

First, Western China’s Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is largely dominated by the Uighurs with cultural and historical ties with the Central Asian States (predominantly Turkmenistan). It shares its borders with Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and the Tibet Autonomous Region. During the 1990s, Uighur separatist groups in Xinjiang began frequent attacks against the Chinese government being led by East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). In this context it is stated that, “Today when people from Central Asia are going through a process of national and religious liberation following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, some people in Xinjiang believe that a window of opportunity to recreate the Muslim state of East Turkestan, which was incorporated into China in 1949, has emerged” (Gladney, 2001:457). However, there was a game change after 9/11 after which the international community witnessed US-China cooperation to combat terrorism. The Bush Administration designated the East Turkistan Islamic Movement² (ETIM) as a terrorist organization in August 2002 that was followed by the declaration of United Nations (UN) that left ample scope for China to expand its sphere of influence through SCO’s Anti-Terrorism Structure

² ETIM is an extremist movement mostly active in the Xinjiang province at the Pakistan-China border. It was founded by Uighurs, the Turkic-speaking ethnic majority in Xinjiang, seeking an independent state called East Turkestan

(RATS). However, it was not listed as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation in the updated list of September 2012 list that clearly indicated the shifting of the US policy in the light of the Asia pivot strategy.

Second, China's quest for energy was started in the early 1990s when "in the year 1997, the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) acquired the Uzen oilfield in western Kazakhstan. Later, China made its entry into the Zhanazhol, Kenjiyake, and Wujing fields. Over time the nature of these enterprises has diversified from sole ownership to joint ventures" (Pham, 2006:57). As energy demand was driven by economic growth, its "huge energy demands have been so voracious that it has left behind the demands from the other countries and in 2010 it became the world's largest energy consumer" (Swartz and Oster, 2010). Strategic analysts often argue that overtime China's foreign policy in the region became heavily intertwined with its quest for energy and consequently, "Central Asia remains a low priority for the government in Beijing, and so policy is shaped on an ad hoc basis via deals made by various companies and government organs" (Kucera, 2013).

International politics witnesses that China's quest for energy resources has culminated into pipeline politics in the CARs whereby each country and major player want to outdo the other in their competition for forging agreements and deals for pipelines. In the race for pipelines, China has taken the lead which has been closely followed by Russia. For example, the China-Turkmenistan (also called as China-Central Asia pipeline) carrying natural gas and passing through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is already operational since 2009. Also, the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline will start operating fully by 2014.

Some of the initiatives taken by the Chinese authorities in 2012 to penetrate its presence include proposal for Turkmenistan gas that directly challenges the TAPI pipeline and bypasses Pakistan to get the Turkmenistan gas via the North Afghanistan and Tajikistan; proposal for China-POK rail link through Kashgar special economic zone, and, Turkmen-Afghan-China pipeline; construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway line, and, political interest and subsequent support to the planned Iran- Pakistan oil pipeline.

In the economic and strategic interests of China it is essential that a continuous supply of resources is maintained and second, the pipelines are well protected not only in China but also through the regions from where it passes. Regular and conscious decisions are taken by the Chinese foreign and security policy makers in accordance with the changing international security environment. As China is not in a position to strategically upset either of the countries in the backdrop of limiting either US's influence or any other external power's role in the region, it continues its tightrope walk in the region.

Russia is another major contending power in Central Asia that has been reflected by the upsurge in its diplomatic pursuits for enhancing its areas of influence in the last two decades. As the world attention has shifted to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region (AFPAK) and the Central Asian region, the primary interest of Russia has been to limit the influence of U.S. and other emerging powers like India in what is being considered as its 'geo-strategic hinterland'. The view that persists in Russia's leadership is that "it has lost its anchor in the mountains and deserts of Central Asia and so cannot actively block or disrupt — or even well monitor — any developments to its deep south that could threaten its security" (Friedman, 2008:12). The fifth expansion of NATO (of March 2004) which was termed as 'encirclement of Russia', and, after the 'war on terror' that brought the US led NATO forces in the Central Asian region to flex its muscles, the CAR has assumed tremendous

significance from a strategic angle. The 2011 Dushanbe³ summit resulted in the improvement of relations between Russia, China and Pakistan. The leaders of the three nations in their joint statement, “stressed for an important role of the countries through regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2011). Thus, Russia along with Pakistan and China is making efforts to downplay the role of the US in the region and of the emerging players like India, thereby, potentially shifting the geopolitical alliance system.

For expanding its own role in the region, Russia has concluded an agreement with Tajikistan for the extension of its basing rights until 2042 (without lease). It has also sought another extension until 2032 in Kyrgyzstan. Russia has further made an attempt to limit the strategic influence of India in the region. “Despite India spending US\$1.1 million on the Ayni military base in Tajikistan, strategic pressure from Russia has blocked the way for it to deploy its fighter aircrafts and to have access there” (Ramchandran, 2008). Russia does not want foreign powers to deploy fighter aircraft in its ‘strategic backyard’. The prospects for India having its strategic presence are dim in the background of the upcoming Afghanistan-Pakistan-Russia and Tajikistan axis. Already India has been sidelined in the Afghan peace process that involves Russia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US. All these developments point out that in the coming years, India will face tremendous challenges to expand militarily in the CAR, and, this challenge will have lack support of its ‘old friend’ Russia.

Simultaneously, Russia has also been successful in concluding a military cooperation agreement in 2013 with Kazakhstan to establish a regional defense system that includes deployment of the missile defense system. Under the deal, Moscow has “pledged to transfer several S-300 air defense systems to its neighbor’s armed forces at no-cost” (Valvo, 2011). This agreement is in response to the US deployment of Missile defense shield in Poland in the Eastern Europe. However, with President Obama cancelling the planned fourth phase of an anti-missile system that had been scheduled for deployment in Poland in 2022, there are hopes that the race for dense shield soon comes to a halt. On a parallel front, the US president also announced the deployment of additional ballistic missile interceptors along the Pacific coast to counter the threat from North Korea. This has increased the chances of China ‘feeling’ threatened and going for closer cooperation with Russia. As the game of the Asia pivot will soon unfold with the southern and central Asian regional balance tilting in favour of China and Russia, it will become difficult for India to make choices thereby downplaying its political and strategic efforts in the region.

Further, in order to enhance its role in the region from an economic perspective, Russia has actively been engaged in the pipeline politics. It has focussed its geo-political strategies on controlling the direct export routes to Europe rather than through Central Asia. Since the agreements between the CARs and European nations will be at the cost of Russia because gas from the region is transferred to the European markets through the Russian pipeline system that it inherited from the USSR. It is for this reason that Turkmenistan is of paramount importance due to its large reserves. However, after a brief economic partnership, Turkmenistan lost interest in Moscow as an intermediary and turned to China which has

³ In this summit a quadrilateral Meeting of the Presidents of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia Federation and Tajikistan took place Russia conveyed its willingness to become militarily involved in Afghanistan post US exit and stressed on the importance of the regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

increasingly emerged as a major consumer of Turkmen gas. The recent developments such as Pakistan- Russia agreeing jointly to cooperate on a pipeline project under which gas would be imported from Iran, laying down of the foundation for the first two sections of the southern stream pipeline⁴ strongly hints towards a resurgent Russia attempting to downplay the role of US and EU in the region through economic measures.

The proposed Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) that was announced by Vladimir Putin in 2011 is another initiative by Russia to limit the sphere of influence of the western powers. The efforts have been termed as an “attempt to re-Sovietize the region” (Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, 2012). The new customs union consisting of Russia and the former Soviet states aims at a unified customs territory. It aims to remove the customs barriers and enhance the trade within the Eurasian subcontinent. “The Eurasian Union will help Russia retain privileged access to resources and help to pull the post-Soviet states’ economies into a closer Russian orbit, thereby strengthening its influence over their politics and constraining their ability to develop relations with outside powers” (Cohen, 2013).

3. INDIA'S STAKES IN CENTRAL ASIA AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

As India lost the visibility and presence in the region with shifts in the regional balance of power, it has become imperative for it to increase its strategic foot hold in the region. India is culturally and historically linked with Central Asia, the regional events influence to a large extent the balance of power in the South Asian region and in particular India.

For India, geopolitical significance of CAR has increased manifold. Several factors such as huge reserves of hydrocarbons and natural oil in the region, China's overreaching strategic and economic presence in the region and US announcement of its plans to exit Afghanistan have made it imperative for India to increase its interaction with the CAR and Afghanistan at a strategic, political and economic level.

First, India's geostrategic interests' lie in the region also because the Central Asian countries follow moderate Islam. It is India's continued interests that none of these countries come under the influence of radical Islam which can subsequently create the possibilities of export of Islamic terrorism to India as it is already facing the separatist movement in the province of Kashmir. And, given the historical rivalry that India has with Pakistan, India has doubts on the political will and capacity of Pakistan to protect that section of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline that will be constructed for its entry into India.

Additionally, India also has strategic interests to prevent Pakistan from expanding further its geopolitical clout with US, Russia and China. Its importance can be highlighted from the fact that the US is dependent on Pakistan to help it in combating Islamic terrorism. The US

⁴ The pipeline will run along the bottom of the Black Sea and transport gas from southern Russia through Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary and Slovenia to Italy, bypassing Ukraine on the way. South Stream is to be completed by 2015 and will provide Central Europe with up to 63 billion cubic metres of gas per year. South Stream is of considerable political importance: it will undermine the monopoly position of Ukraine as a transit country for gas supplies and ensure that Europe continues to receive a large proportion of its gas from Russia. The North Stream pipeline commenced operations in November 2011. The new North Stream transit route has led to a 21.3 percent drop in Russian gas supplies to Western Europe through Ukraine.

has already rewarded it with its “military assistance worth US \$ 16 Billion” (Hanauer and Chalk, 2012:x). Russia has already started wooing Pakistan through its bilateral meetings and at multilateral level through the Dushanbe summit that involved Tajikistan and Afghanistan. It has thus become essential for India to counter the influence of Pakistan.

China’s strategic and economic presence in the region through various arrangements such as SCO, economic trade partnerships, investments in the natural gas and oil pipelines, etc., have to be balanced through urgent measures by the Government of India. This is also keeping in view China’s ‘string of pearls’ policy and the overreach that it has in the two regions. It is thus important for India that Central Asia does not fall under the exclusive Russian and/ or Chinese influence.

Due to geographical constraints such as Afghanistan and Pakistan blocking the way for pipelines, etc., India could not effectively play a role in the region. Of late, India has taken initiatives to consolidate its position in the Central Asian region. It became an associate member of the SCO in 2005 in order to forge close partnerships with the individual countries of the region and consequently entered into a strategic partnership agreements with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, respectively. Additionally, in the infrastructure sector, India has proposed to integrate land routes linking it to Central Asia as part of the International North-South Corridor project. Under the project, Chahbahar port has been proposed to be built by India with an initial investment of dollars hundred million (Jayanth, 2013). It also involves construction of the Delaram Zaranj highway worth six hundred crore rupees, and, completion of the two hundred and two kilometres electricity transmission line from Uzbekistan (Pul-e-Khumri) to Afghanistan (Kabul). Apart from this, its investments in Afghanistan are around 2 Billion Dollars in various infrastructure and social sector projects. Unfortunately, all these efforts do not suffice to influence the region’s geopolitics, and thus, India is not considered as a major player in the region.

The present day geopolitical conditions coupled with the stakes that India has in the region makes it necessary for the policymakers to take immediate steps that enhance the strategic position of India. Due to the changed security architecture of Asia coupled with the prior investments of China and Russia, it has not been able to carve out an important place for itself. The Asian balance of power has gradually shifted in favour of China on the one hand, and, the rise of certain new middle powers such as Iran and Syria who have successfully created an arc of influence with China and Russia. Additionally, Pakistan has joined the Islamic pipeline that has added to the stockpile of strategic challenges of India. With Asia pivot already been announced and India having concluded a civil nuclear deal with the US, there are all possibilities that the present changes security architecture of Asia is going to be a tight rope walk for the decision makers in the South Block. With this background, it becomes important to highlight the various strategic challenges faced by India in the implementation of its CCAP:

3.1. Russia’s Strategic Drift to China

Bilateral relations with Russia have been one of the key pillars of India’s foreign policy. The friendship and defence relations between the two have been time tested and have played an important role in the foreign policy contours of India. The two nations celebrated the 65th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. Lately, the geopolitical shifts and the coinciding of their strategic and economic interests in the Central Asian region have brought Russia and China closer to each other. Both countries concluded a strategic

partnership agreement in 1996 and in 2001 signed a treaty of Good Neighbourliness. China has been considerably successful in strategically embracing Russia, first, through the mechanism of SCO, and later, through joint military exercises initiated in 2005. These exercises were initially implemented “at the strong behest of China and it assumed most of the expenditure of the exercise” (Hyodo, 2005:2). The Maritime Cooperation joint naval exercises and Peace Mission 2013, joint anti-terrorist exercises that have been conducted this year has sent strong signals to India on Russia's shifting priorities to China.

The most striking feature of this budding strategic alliance between Russia and China is the arms export by the former to the later that began in 2005 wherein Russia agreed to shell out its Tu-22M3 and Tu-95MS. This development was a parallel attempt by Russia in the wake of India diversifying its defence procurement policies and thereby establishing sales links with Israel, France and other western countries. As India changes its stance to decide in favour of any one friendly country, Russia has found China as a ‘more interested buyer’. Most recently in March 2013, “Moscow has agreed to sell 24 Sukhoi Su-35 fighters and four Amur-class conventional submarines worth \$ 3.5 Billion to Beijing” (Lague, 2013). This development has put the Indo-Russian defence partnership in a rough patch and has brought China and Russia strategically more closely associated to each other.

Another objective that the both nations have in common is the energy link. Exports of oil to China for counterweighing the European allies of the US have been one of the primary motives for their strategic embrace. As Russia's quest for new potential buyers of its crude oil began, China has emerged as one of the most prominent and impressive buyers owing to its own energy requirement. Thus, both countries envisaged and completed the first phase of the Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean (ESPO) pipeline in 2009. The second phase has been completed in early 2013. As this pipeline meets the demand for oil to China, Japan, South Korea, Phillipines, Singapore and Taiwan, it gives Russia more leverage over Europe by substantially threatening to decrease its supplies. This pipeline has brought both Russia and China strategically closer to each other.

The rationale for mutual cooperation for the two countries is different. Russia views the strategic cooperation with China as positive engagement that would guarantee security to its borders in the Far East, China on the other hand perceives the engagement from the lens of Taiwan. A hostile Russia would be a distraction in its reunification efforts with Taiwan, a condition that would be diplomatically and strategically unfavourable for China. Also, Russia's influence in the CAR would help China diplomatically to extend its influence, something that has proven correct in the last decade. Though strategic relationship has been the result for different objectives, yet, Russia has diplomatically drifted away from India.

This drift is of significant concern for India as it alters the Asian security balance in favour of China. Though this partnership seems to be directed against the US, India has lost the Russian leverage in Central Asia. Given the continuing geopolitical clout that Russia has in the region, maintenance of strategic ties with it would have been more fruitful. For example, despite India's diplomatic lobbying, it could not gain control over the Ayni military base in Tajikistan due to Russia's disapproval. This has hindered the Indian ability to make its presence felt. As Russia moves towards China to possibly form a bloc against the US and its allies, India, because of its own geostrategic shifts under the Asia Pivot, would possibly feel the wrath of Russia's strategic shifts in the times to come.

3.2. Pakistan-China Strategic Alliance

The most formidable challenge for India in expanding its influence beyond the South Asian region comes from the Sino-Pak alliance that began in 1972. India's unresolved border disputes with China and Pakistan compel New Delhi to have a primarily Sino-Pakistan orientation towards the region. "The loss of the Soviet ally has undermined the political and economic choices of the Indian regime since the departure of Britain, forcing a complex international reorientation marked by a fear of the growing Sino-Pakistan alliance and the development of a new dialogue with the United States" (Laurelle et al., 2010:2). Due to this, India did not see any threat to its interests with the US presence in the region.

Closely linked to India's presence in the CAR is the challenge posed by the Sino-Pak alliance. As it is quite an accepted fact that the purpose of this alliance is to "tie down India in the South Asian region", Indian policy makers have always considered the strategic relations between China and Pakistan in their decision making. India's primary interest is to prevent both Pakistan and China from extending their strategic clout in the region through Afghanistan (door between central and South Asia). Though India cannot counter with the already established clout of China, yet, it can make attempts to limit the scope of Pakistan's role in Afghanistan and in the Central Asian region. It is for these reasons that "India spent 70 million between 2002 and 2010 to renovate the Ayni base" (Sharma, 2012) apart from establishing its first foreign military base in Farkhor. The location of both of these military bases is important because of Tajikistan's land connectivity to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir PoK (base for anti-India terrorist camps). If India gains access to these bases, it can also be of significant value because a close watch can be kept on the Gwadar base that has been currently handed over to China.

Key recent developments such as Russia and China's veto in the UNSC on Syria and India's decision in favor of it; Pakistan joining the 'Islamic or friendship' pipeline; handing of Gwadar port to China; China's incursions in Depsang Bulge area in the Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) sector of Ladakh as a prelude to the military standoff that lasted for twenty one days seriously undermine India's role in both the South and Central Asian Regions. These developments portend huge geopolitical shifts in the coming years as the regional players look towards China, and away from the west.

In the times to come the entire geo-political balance will tilt towards China that will eventually have implications on India's security and the energy market. With China strategically gaining more strength, the possibilities of Sino-Pak strategic alliance working against the Indian interest is high that can pose serious challenges in various aspects. Circumstances for India can get all the more complicated once it finally takes conscious decisions to seek external balancing to the extent that its eventually becomes a major non NATO ally- something quite similar to Pakistan's status during the days of war on terror.

3.3. Strengthening the Energy links

The next major challenge for India's CCP is to establish and strengthen its energy linkages with the region to ensure energy security. Having well established the area's richness in precious energy resources, strengthening strategic links would be of paramount importance to India as in the last six decades, India's energy use has increased sixteen times and the installed electricity capacity by eighty-four times. In 2008, India's energy use was

the fifth highest in the world. "By 2050, India is likely to be the world's single largest importer of oil and its demand for gas is expected to rise from 120 million cubic meters a day (mcmd) to 391 mcmd by 2025" (Bisaria, 2013:184). "As per the estimates made in the Integrated Energy Policy Report of Planning Commission of India, 2006, if the country is to progress on the path of this sustained GDP growth rate during the next twenty five years, it would imply quadrupling of its energy needs over 2003-04 levels with a six-fold increase in the requirement of electricity and a quadrupling in the requirement of crude oil" (Garg, 2012:7). Energy crisis is thus unavoidable if urgent measures for achieving energy security are not undertaken. Energy security is thus, a national and foreign policy priority.

With the discoveries of hydrocarbons and oil in the region, it has vast opportunities to tie up with the individual countries of the region for the said purpose. Kazakhstan has the second largest oil reserves as well as the second largest oil production among the former Soviet republics after Russia as per the According to the statistics of the US's Energy Information Administration's country report. It exports 25% of its oil to Italy and 16% to China through Atasu-Alashankou pipeline (2006), Kenkiyak-Kumkol pipeline (2009). Regarding the export of natural gas, Kazakhstan is currently focussing its efforts on the building up of the Beineu-Bozoi-Akbulak pipeline to China that will be completed by the end of 2015.⁵ India has no similar agreements with Kazakhstan for the import of its oil and natural gas. China has thus advanced ahead in terms of forging strategic relations with Kazakhstan. It had framed for itself a very coherent strategy with the CARs in the 1990s itself, the results of which are being reaped today. Thus, similar agreements have to be attempted at.

Given the above facts, India in 2011 made serious efforts in deepening its relations with the CARs for its energy needs. The following three agreements are being considered as India's leap in enhancing its presence in the said region:

- Package of three Agreements between ONGC Videsh Ltd. and National Company 'Kazmunaigas' on Satpayev Exploration Block (2011);
- Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy (2011), and,
- Joint Action Plan for furthering the Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Republic of Kazakhstan (Road Map) for the period of 2011-2014

India began to search for alternative sources of uranium in the backdrop of Indo-US Civil Nuclear deal. One of the most recent and important initiatives on the part of India has been the conclusion of a nuclear deal with Kazakhstan in 2011. As it "holds the world's second largest uranium reserves, constituting almost one-fifth of the global reserves, in 2010 it produced 18,000 tonnes of uranium and this is expected to go up to 30,000 tonnes by 2018" (Bhadrakumar, 2011). Though India has made efforts, still it lags behind China even in its quest for uranium. The latter is the largest buyer of Kazakh uranium. "In 2007, Kazatomprom and China Guangdong Nuclear Power Group agreed to produce nuclear fuel. In April 2009, China and Kazakhstan created the Semizbay-U enterprise at Irkol, planning to produce 750 tons of uranium annually. In 2011, the two sides agreed on the supply of 55,000 tons of uranium over the next 10 years" (Muzalevsky, 2011). India thus strategically lags behind and is not able to play a role that it aspires for itself, despite the region having a

⁵ US Energy Information Administration: Independent Statistics and Analysis- Kazakhstan, 2012.

strategic, political and economic significance for the country. However, it can utilise the new initiatives for itself with the already existing strategic relations with Russia.

3.4. Making India Economically Indispensible

As the cold war ended, the very rationale for Russia to trade with India declined in addition with the formation of the new states that had new choices for trade partnerships. “From an economic perspective, the dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in a sharp decline in India’s exports. India’s share of exports that accounted to 10% prior to the dissolution, decreased drastically to only 1.5% in 1992” (Mukerji, 2012). Thus, the immediate economic challenge for India in Central Asia was to create demand for its goods and services in an area that had been completely isolated from an international banking and trade network. In the economic sphere, the conventional trade turnover between India and Central Asia has been hampered by the lack of an overland trade transit route. India has made efforts for the same through the International North-South Corridor project proposal. The political imperative of engaging with India was rooted in the commonly held perception among Central Asian leaders that India was sympathetic and relevant for the unique situation in which they found themselves. India’s role in the global decolonization process made it an attractive partner for the Central Asian states, who were themselves emerging from the shadows of a century and a half of colonial rule. However, despite the economic similarities between the CAR and India, bilateral trade has remained much less as compared to their respective trade pattern with other regional powers such as China, EU and Russia. “India’s overall trade with the region annually stands at a relatively low level of US \$ Dollars 500 million as against China’s US \$ 29 billion; Russia’s US \$ 26 billion; Turkey’s US \$ 6.5 billion; Iran’s US \$ 4 billion and USA’s US \$ 3 billion” (Bisaria, 2013:185). A quick look at the table of imports of central Asian countries from the major regional players tells of our economic presence in the region.

“Russia continues to be the main source of imports for the region, supplying energy products and manufactured products. The EU is in second place, providing various machinery and equipment to Central Asia. Over the decade, China has progressed from providing few imports to Central Asia in 2000 to providing over 10% of total imports to the region in 2010, making it the third largest source of imports, according to CA countries’ official data. Official imports from China consist largely of machinery and equipment,

Table 1. Imports of Central Asian Countries from Key Partners outside the Region

	2000		2010	
	Billion US\$	% of total exports	Billion US\$	% of total exports
Russia	3.1	27.2	17.2	27.3
E.U	2.2	19.0	11.1	17.5
China	0.28	2.4	6.8	10.7
USA	0.59	5.1	4.1	6.6
Pakistan	0.15	1.3	1.9	3.1
Japan	0.34	3.0	0.88	1.4
India	0.99	0.9	0.84	1.3

Source: Mogilevskii, Roman. 2012. Trends and Patterns in Foreign Trade of Central Asian Countries.

metals and consumer goods” (Mogilevskii, 2012:31). India on the other hand has not been able to materialize any major import deals and its share in the Central Asian imports has moved marginally up to 1.3% (lesser than even Pakistan). This is something that needs attention from the policy makers as defence and trade relations today constitute a major part of the bilateral relations and allows for the countries to expand their spheres of influence beyond their own areas. Apart from the trade, another major challenge comes in the form of low presence of Indian banks in the CAR coupled with less interest in the region by the Indian private companies and investors. India has a stake of US \$ 2 billion in Afghanistan, but it is comparatively less as compared to that of “US \$ 10 billion of China” (Huasheng, 2012). Comparatively, important economic investments coupled with a strong bilateral trade with the countries of the region gave China, Russia and the US an upper hand in the geopolitical matters of the region.

3.5. Containment of Radical Islamic Activity in the region

Islam arrived in Central Asia in the mid seventh century and by the eighth century it became the dominated religion thereby covering all the aspects of the civilization there. Under the Soviet rule (especially under Stalin and Khrushchev), Islam's participation in the political life was repressed. At the time of the collapse of the soviet empire “most Muslims possessed a rudimentary knowledge of Islamic teachings” (Gunn, 2003:390). After the disintegration political participation of Islam was revived as despite its repression period, it was the identity of a majority of the population. The people were not happy with the new economic and political system and started identifying corruption and inequality with capitalism. The only solution that seemed to be viable for the uneducated and unemployed was to seek refuge in an Islamic model of life that could possibly solve their problems. It is here where the seeds of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism were sowed. A lot of unemployed able men from the region were trained in the terrorist camps operating Afghanistan and North Pakistan.

As Religious extremism is considered as a major threat to the international peace and security, particular emphasis is placed on the rise and spread of Islamic terrorism due to the presence of certain Islamic groups in central and South Asia preaching intolerance towards the other faiths that has far reaching security implications throughout the world. In the present day scenario, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Uighur Liberation Organization (ULO) are the most active radical Islamic groups operating within the CAR and have potential to destabilize the region especially Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

India's interest in this region is motivated by curtailing radical Islam having a potential to create political instability in the CAR thereby having a spill-over effect to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and finally to the Indian province of Jammu and Kashmir. Out of the five countries of the CAR, Tajikistan is of utmost importance to India because of its strategic proximity to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). India is extremely cautious with the developments in the Afghanistan and Pakistan because any major political and military development in the region has the capacity to significantly increase the separatist movement and armed insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir. The threat of Islamic fundamentalism is of grave concern for not only India, but also for the countries such as Russia, China and EU against the backdrop of NATO exit from Afghanistan in 2014 and given the historical rivalry of two nuclear powers. Hence, political stability and repression of the radical Islamic forces in the CARs is in India's vital strategic interests.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Given the challenges that India faces in its CCAP, it becomes imperative for it to adopt multifaceted policies to rebalance the region in its favour that are now dominated by Russia, China and to some extent Pakistan. Rebalancing any region can never be an immediate reaction to the key developments. It involves conscious policy decision making that focuses on military and economic outreach on a simultaneous level playing field. And for this it is necessary that India includes within its ambit the following recommendations:

Since security and economic outreach are interlinked, it is necessary for India to increase its strategic presence. India should aim for its participation and membership in the Quadripartite Group established in 2009, which includes Russia, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan. As India achieved an observer status in the SCO, and the Quadripartite Group focuses itself on the regional security and stability in Afghanistan, its involvement in this particular group can definitely elevate India's status by manifold. For this purpose, the key countries that can 'push' India's agenda further by lobbying can be Russia, Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Simultaneous efforts have to be made to convince the US and Russia to include India in the Afghan peace process. India should not be sidelined in the regional politics because it is directly affected by any instability in the region. Since the US-Pakistan relations are on a declining level and Russia has been in the past a 'trusted partner', there are possible chances that India can be included in it if it intensifies its lobbying channels.

Tajikistan is of significant importance to India from another strategic point of view. Being geographically closer to the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) through the Wakhan corridor, paramount importance should be given to this country. India should strengthen its strategic presence in the country. To achieve this, it should reassess and refocus its relations by strengthening its agency to agency cooperation with the Tajiks. For this purpose, military modernisation of Tajikistan on a no-profit basis should be considered. India should be able to convince Tajikistan to conclude agreements with India that focuses on building capacity of it in the military domains. Also, a regular joint military exercise in Tajikistan with counter-terrorism as its core mission is what India should aim for. Though joint military exercises with the central Asian countries was initiated in 2003 India soon lost its focus to US, Japan, etc. Though these countries are very important for India, nevertheless, it should hold joint exercises with multiple countries simultaneously – something that is amiss in the Indian defence policy. Additionally, options for a trilateral treaty between India, Russia and Tajikistan for counterterrorism should be explored in the light of the fact that the three countries would be severely affected if there would be an increase in the terrorism after the US forces exit Afghanistan next year. Such an agreement would not only give a boost to the Indian presence in the region, but would also limit to some extent the increasing strategic closeness of Tajikistan and Russia with Pakistan.

For carving out its place in Afghanistan, India should consider Afghan President Hamid Karzai's 'wish-list' of its military and strategic requirements from India. India should go ahead with it. Now this is something like a 'golden opportunity' for India. This is so because this 'wish list' is the 'need of the hour' for Afghanistan. As there are many potential suppliers like China and Russia, this opportunity lost would definitely mean losing out to the Afghan defence market for the next couple of decades. This would be something that can prove to be detrimental for our strategic interests if the policy makers view at the picture

from the Pakistan angle. As the Chinese are already strategically closer to Pakistan and if it eventually emerges as a reliable supplier to Afghanistan, things can really be disastrous for India. The new big game is already half way through and if India still hesitates to behave like a 'reluctant realist', chances are that it might come up with another diplomatic policy to connect with central Asia.

In June 2011, the SCO formally approved a 'memorandum of obligation', which will now enable non-member countries to apply for SCO membership. The inclusion of South Asian countries – India and Pakistan with an observer status and Sri Lanka as a dialogue partner itself speaks of SCO's strategic engagement aiming at South Asia beyond the CAR. With India having an observer status in the SCO and having expressed a desire to play a larger role in the regional organisation and in the region, it should channelize its diplomatic and strategic resources to achieve the same. The importance of a full membership in the SCO can be seen from the fact that the Indian policymakers have openly acknowledged the critical role that the SCO can play in "countering terrorism through collaborative efforts and a greater profile in Afghanistan" (Shanghai Cooperation, 2011).

This becomes all the more important from another perspective. As the balance of power in the central Asian region and in West Asia is shifting in favor of China and Russia at a very fast pace, India cannot afford to lose out on this, especially in the backdrop of Asia pivot and it strengthening its strategic alliances with the key allies of the US such as Japan. The most recent developments of India-China military standoff and Indo-Japan US-2 aircraft deal has been criticized by China as its 'encirclement'. Thus, despite the situation so warrants and given the uncertainty of level of cooperation or the possibility of a fierce competition between NATO and CSTO- India is not militarily or economically strong enough to antagonize one power in favor of another. Thus, full membership of the SCO should be sought for at the earliest through the windows of diplomacy with China and Russia.

And for this, it is important that India should by all means avoid being sucked itself into the competition between China and the US for power and superiority in the East Asian region, and rather focus on strengthening its roots in the CAR. With the relocation of US priorities through the announcement of the Asia Pivot Strategy, India has to be extremely cautious that it will not be used just as a being linchpin for its strategy in both East and Central Asia. With the recent comments of Robert Blake, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia that India's position is that of an 'economic linchpin' in Afghanistan (Narayan, 2013), it has raised fears that the changed defense priorities of the US will affect India to the extent of forcing it to concentrate on managing its geopolitical clout in the South Asian region with China on the one hand and Pakistan on the other. As a result, India might not be able focus on its CCAP. India should not lose its focus on the CAR due to the stakes it has in the region. India should recognise that it is neither financially nor militarily well positioned to play an active role in the balancing game by taking sides. Rather, it should be skillful in utilising the geopolitical opportunities for itself that the competition creates with the aim of its interest maximisation in the CAR.

Given the potential broad strategic realignments and the nature of the domestic and strategic insecurity in Afghanistan in the immediate future, it is crucial for India to make war footing efforts at a macro and micro level for expanding its geopolitical influence in the region. Failing to do so would literally 'tie down India' in the South Asian region, something that both Sino-Pak alliance aspire for. India must seriously utilize its entire diplomatic and strategic means at its disposal to make itself inevitable for the region. It has to create its own space and for this high level cooperation with Russia, Tajikistan and Afghanistan is crucial.

To think of containing China in the region is something invincible; thus, a tight rope walk is required on the part of foreign policy decision makers to effectively balance between China, Russia and the United States on the other front. Thinking and acting strategically in all the directions without checkmating our own moves is the need of the hour.

In the social sector, food security is an emerging problem in the Central Asian states, India should utilise this opportunity not only from a trade perspective but also for enhancing its goodwill in the respective countries 'public opinion. Certain goodwill gestures have to be taken up on a serious level on the part of India. There are instances where gestures like giving low price wheat and rice to many South Asian nations like Pakistan have not resulted in creating a favourable public opinion or altering the anti-India sentiment. In such cases, India should redirect its food resources to these central Asian states especially to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Also, given the surplus wheat available in the centrally held warehouses throughout India and with the new bumper crop of wheat already entered the market, the Indian government should take some bold and innovative measures to utilise it. India should either supply it at a very low cost to these countries as a goodwill gesture. By this way both the purpose i.e. enhancing India's image in the region and avoidance of wastage of wheat would be achieved.

Finally, India should look beyond strategic and economic cooperation and find new vistas of cooperation with the Central Asian Republics. Positively engaging the Central Asian republics such as 'friendship hospitals' in each of the central Asian country, exchanging information and cooperating in counter-terrorism, technical and financial help in the establishment of various self-help groups (replica of Self Employed Women's Association-SEWA in the Indian villages), promoting educational exchanges, training to the nurses in the central Asian states, and, encouragement of Indian Ayurvedic and Unani medicines can go a long way in deepening the relationship by making the Indian presence inevitable in the CAR.

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